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SHOWBIZ

BOB JACKSON Gazette Telegraph

Showbiz Pizza Place promotes fun

From electronic games to food, families will find entertainment

By Linda DuVal
GT Features Editor

In a world of sophisticated computers even the pizza parlors are becoming unique.

Showbiz Pizza Place, 3143 W. Colorado Ave., is more than pizza. It's a family experience. And if you just happen to be between the ages of 1 to about 10 — it must be heaven.

A renovated 12,000-square-foot grocery store, Showbiz Pizza Place opened two weeks ago. It's been playing to a full house ever since.

It's not just pizza and an arcade of video games that draws the public, a computer animated rock band "Rock-Afire Explosion" steals the show in the dining room.

On center stage "The Rock-Afire Explosion" wails with Fatz, the gorilla, on keyboard; Dook, a dog drummer; Beach Bear, on guitar; and Mitzi mouse, a vocalist.

Rolfe de Wolfe with Earl Schmerle, his hand puppet, are featured at Stage Left while Billy Bob on guitar and Looney Bird, a rather irritating little heckler, perform on Stage Right.

They tell jokes and play popular songs familiar to the '60s moving in synchronization with the songs.

It's a cleverly contrived bit of showmanship, all operated by computer. Fourteen mini-shows are repeated every two hours.

After dinner, or before if you prefer, most everyone heads to the arcade, which features about 60 electronic games and rides for little ones. There is a showhouse, with an animated cartoon, a mini-ferris wheel, a race car, helicopter and space ship rides for the tots. A free slide helps ease the strain on the pocketbook.

For older kids and adults, there are many electronic games, from race car driving to Pac Man, and all the other popular favorites. There are electronic table games and Skee-ball, too.

"We're a family-run organization, and we're looking to show families a good time," says manager Jim Karasek.

If you want to eat when you get inside you will find a variety of good things besides pizza. There's a salad bar, sandwiches, beer and soft drinks, dessert sundaes, cotton candy and hot dogs. And you get a few free video game and amusement ride tokens with each purchase.

While waiting for your food, you can have a seat and watch the show. It's a good way to keep youngsters entertained.

Besides the stage show, there are usually a few birthday parties going on, with a costumed Billy Bob visiting tables and leading the party in a rendition of "Happy Birthday." A complimentary cake is provided by the management.

A birthday party package is available on a day's notice, sometimes less.

Television monitors show the numbers of orders which are ready to be picked up. You may have to wait awhile for your order if the dining room is full.

The pizza is delicious. It's thick but has a lightly textured crust and flavorful toppings.

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Fechter's fantasy turns fun for profit

By Elena Jarvis
GT Entertainment Editor

When he was a boy, Aaron Fechter used to try to impress acquaintances by telling them of a secret, underground "race" of robots.

Fechter recalls that his story contained the sobering fact that one day he would unleash these mechanical monsters on the world.

Mostly, his friends thought he was a little weird.

Still a "kid" at age 28, ironically Fechter's prediction is coming true. He still enjoys living in a world of fantasy, but the difference is that he now gets paid handsomely for it.

As the president of Creative Engineering Inc., Fechter is creator of the "Rock-Afire Explosion," a computerized rock band that entertains diners at the Showbiz Pizza Place.

"We don't really call them robots, though that's what they are. They are machinery operated by a computer and their function in 'life' is to simulate life," says Fechter in a telephone interview from his home in Orlando, Fla.

Comprised of drummer Dook, keyboardist Fatz,

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Aaron Fechter turns his fantasies into profit-making reality

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guitarist Beach Bear, and Mitzi, the vocalist, the group is complemented by the talents of Rolfe de Wolfe, Billy Bob and Looney Bird.

Since embarking on the Showbiz concept in March, 1980, Fechter's supplied 60 locations with his "Electronimation," a registered trademark like Frisbee.

The amazing growth of the company, owned by the Brock Hotel group, has stretched from its first spot in Topeka, Kan., to Colorado Springs.

The first of two Showbiz Pizza Places opened two weekends ago at 3143 W. Colorado Ave. A second operation is under construction on North Academy Boulevard between Handy Dan's and Target.

And it all started at age 10 when he built his first robot.

"I was always into the imaginative end of what I could do with robots," he recalls. "One day, it became actually possible to do what I dreamed I could do."

The dream is never-ending. Plans call for Showbiz to add special computers to their restaurants that will enable customers to select programs, much like a jukebox.

"The plans are unlimited as to what they will eventually do," says the dark-haired inventor. "We already have the computer 'jukebox' in a prototype form."

MASTER OF FANTASY: Aaron Fechter is the youthful inventor behind Creative Engineering.

Not only will the animals take requests, but the computer will be able to make judgements as to what is chosen.

"It will check to see if the show has been played in the last few minutes," he explains. "If it has, it won't duplicate. Billy Bob will come out on stage and say 'I'm sorry, but ya'll just pressed a button that was played a few minutes ago, so how about pushing another one?'"

Working "day and night," Fechter soon hopes to introduce such startling technology as a satellite-controlled show that would be programmed directly from his Orlando homebase.

The idea is to make the animals more life-like and through the miracle of satellite communication, they will be able to respond directly to crowds.

Fechter, busy developing his mechanical musicians at the time of this conversation, admits to being inspired by Walt Disney.

While he was never employed by Disney, "I was moderately influenced by Disneyworld from the exposure. I fell in love with the idea of friendly-looking, entertaining robots when I saw Disney.

"I wasn't really thinking about robots for entertainment. When I was thinking about them, it was for typical uses — mowing lawns, washing dishes, cleaning the room, all of which is very possible."

An engineer, technician and computer specialist, Fechter considers himself an artist above all.

Fechter's voice (and alter ego) is actually that of Billy Bob's, Showbiz Pizza's formal "bear" of a host. He helps select all the music for the band, and plays piano in the real-life group which produces the music for Rock-Afire.

Pop songs such as "Little Sister," The Beatles' version of "Birthday," the Rolling Stones "Satisfaction" and the Yardbirds' "For Your Love" are included in the songlist.

"That's the part I'm in love with the most — I love being in the band!," he says, adding that the group makes decisions on repertoire democratically.

"We're really working hard to bring quality music into the audio-track," he says. "We've even written some original songs, like 'Goin' Crazy,' that are out circulating now."

An upcoming show tape will be released soon and contains many more new songs written by band members.

Fechter notes with some amusement that the real "Rock-Afire Explosion" will be having its first live gig this month in a special benefit performance in Orlando.

Does he feel any jealousy when live audiences applaud the robots performances?

"Oh man, that's the greatest feeling! That's it! That's the bottom line for me."

Showbiz Pizza fun

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There was just the right amount of sauce and lots of cheese.

You may have to wait at the door a bit on a busy night because the management adheres to the fire code and allows only 300 inside at a time.

The games are popular with all ages, Karasek says.

"I've seen older people, 60-65 years old, playing those games and having a good time," he says.

There's even a game room, which features a large screen television, but it hasn't caught on yet.

"People don't seem to know they can use it," Karasek says. "But we want it used. There's no charge. It's just another room. If they'd rather sit there and watch something special on TV while they eat, instead of going into the show room, they're welcome."

The place has a policy of not allowing teen-agers (under 18) in without an accompanying adult. It's a nation-wide policy, enforced at all 67 restaurants, Karasek says.

"Most managers are just managers. But in this company, you are also a little bit of an electronics expert, a little bit of a business dealer, and a lot familiar with the community."

He realizes that the Colorado Avenue facility will experience seasonal fluctuations, partly because it is in a high tourist attractions area.

"We'll probably become one of the attractions," he says.

A second facility now under construction on North Academy Boulevard near Target and Handy Dan's will open in August, and Karasek believes it will be a year-round facility.

Showbiz Pizza Place is open 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and 11 a.m.-midnight Friday and Saturday. Reservations are requested for large parties.

SHOWBIZ PIZZA PLACE PROMOTES FUN

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